

Ending the Iraq mission

By CPT Chase A. Hasbrouck

Longfellow famously wrote, "Great is the art of beginning, but greater is the art of ending."

On 23 April 2011, the 62nd Expeditionary Signal Battalion began writing its own ending as the final ESB deployment in support of U.S. Forces-Iraq's communications requirements.

As the first 100 days of the deployment draws to a close, it's instructive to look back and determine the lessons learned.

Pre-deployment

After completing our

combined training exercise in January 2011, we turned our full attention to the upcoming deployment. One of the advantages of deploying to a mature theater like Iraq was the wealth of assistance that was provided by the unit we were relieving, the 40th ESB. After studying several plans, we adapted a geographical model similar to 40th's, with each expeditionary Signal company responsible for providing signal support to one of three distinct regions within the Iraqi Joint Operations Area. Due to the quantity and dispersion of

our Signal sites, we adopted a decentralized model, with each ESC standing up a combined company OPS/NETOPS cell that handled reporting and network outages. This was necessary due to one of the challenges present in the Iraqi theater, where we had requirements to support both divisional and USF-I networks.

After an initial adjustment period, this model worked well. The battalion's handling of the planning enabled small-unit leaders to focus on training their Soldiers. This training was crucial because of the wide-scale



CPL Kari Anglin, 40th Expeditionary Signal Battalion, disconnects a generator at Victory Base Camp in Iraq in September 2011 prior to a STT's redeployment.

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use of commercial equipment in theater. While the majority of our mission involved support for a conventional satellite infrastructure, we also had a significant number of LOS IP radios instead of conventional mil-spec LOS's, and custom-built TCF's instead of JNN's. Fortunately we obtained a small number of IP radios prior to the deployment to train our battalion network engineers, who then provided setup and operation instructions. While this led to IP radio troubleshooting mostly being performed at the battalion level, the systems worked well enough that the additional workload was minor.

One small confounding factor was network management. The IP radios used a custom Web interface for configuration that was incompatible with the version of Internet Explorer used in theater. Ultimately, we resolved this by installing an alternate browser on selected computers. This caused persistent IA difficulties.

The most pressing issue we tackled was planning equipment containerization and movement. This was the issue that caused our company commanders the most headaches, and caused us to learn several painful lessons. First, we learned that spending adequate time preparing accurate DA Form 1750's (packing lists) and load plans is essential. The commanders that dedicated necessary time accomplishing this task ended up saving inordinate amounts of time downrange conducting their cyclic and sensitive items inventories. A corollary to this was to keep inventory requirements in mind when determining equipment destinations. A few sub-hand receipt holders found their equipment dispersed to multiple

sites, which led to avoidable time and expense costs. Conducting a "LOADEX" also helped. Many commanders discovered that they needed more containers than expected.

Second, we learned that having multiple unit movement officers embedded at the company level helped tremendously. The sheer quantity of equipment moving in theater necessitated a decentralized movement plan, with each company UMO responsible for that company's movement. UMO's were kept very busy, and having extra personnel to assist kept things moving.

Finally, we learned that it was important to keep flexibility in mind when planning allocation of spares. Delivering spares to a small contingency operation site is not a speedy process. For theater movement, we were reliant on other units which sometimes allocated only one convoy per week. It was critical that smaller bases receive priority for spares fill, in order to prevent outages caused by malfunctioning equipment.

Deployment

Once our battalion arrived in theater, we faced immediate hurdles. The ship delivering our equipment was delayed by several weeks, causing our carefully constructed timeline to disintegrate. We had planned for a two-week validation period for each assemblage and team upon arriving in country. Instead of pushing deadlines even later, we elected to ship the equipment immediately to its final destination, skipping our planned SWITCHEX. While we narrowly made all our movement deadlines (several teams from the 40th ESB conducted their RIP with our team immediately on arrival, and left soon thereafter),

we had several initial problems with network configurations which normally would have been resolved during the SWITCHEX. Soldiers from the 40th ESB helped us resolve all the concerns and problems.

The issues were exacerbated by the multiple-network configurations discussed above. In a few instances, our battalion NETOPS section was reduced to communicating with a site by text messages sent via Blue Force Tracker to a nearby BFT-equipped unit. While conducting troubleshooting in this manner was excruciating, we successfully worked out the problems and got all systems successfully online. This underlines the need for good relationships with supporting units. Without their assistance, we would not have been able to communicate with our communications team at all. Compounding the problem was the dual reporting chain. Several of our sites were under the tactical control of another unit and reported to them, but still relied on us for spares and troubleshooting assistance. While this problem was quickly resolved, we determined that this is an element that should have been introduced into our pre-deployment CTE.

Once we were in-place and established operations ran smoothly. As we had predicted, we suffered several equipment failures over the initial weeks of operation, mostly due to heat-related issues. ECU systems and HPA's were the most likely to fail, though we suffered several generator problems as well. Thinking about issues like cooling and power may sound plebian to some, but our experience was that cooling and power problems were vastly more numerous than network

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and connectivity problems. We mitigated this by deploying extra spares to sites and ensuring our C&E warrant officer was closely tied in to our NETOPS for prompt action.

Finally, one continuing issue was equipment movement. It was far too easy to become overly reliant on RFID tracking in order to track the locations of our containers. On several occasions, we had RFID tags fall off or stop transmitting. We ensured we had LNO's at all major transportation hubs who could confirm the presence or absence of equipment at the site. Retrograde

From the start, we knew that we'd have to plan for our departure while planning our arrival, due to the compressed timeline of the mission. This was confirmed when we arrived. Many commanders aggressively pursued their base closure plans, frequently requesting (and receiving) permission to close bases weeks or months

in advance. Being prepared in advance with a retrograde plan and forming good relationships with the supporting unit on the base is essential. There are many elements that have a hand in the plan. The base command team or mayor's cell, the CRSP yard, the RPAT yard, the TACON unit's headquarters, etc. are all involved. A proactive commander ensures his ideas are represented. A non-proactive commander will have his retrograde planned for him. This generally leads to a less than ideal outcome.

Aggressively disposing of excess equipment (either via turn-in or return to home station) is important because it will speed your clearance when the departure day comes. As can be expected in a mature theater like Iraq, our units signed for significant amounts of theater provided equipment. Do not delay in the process of turning in TPE. The line at the RPAT yard gets longer as departure day comes closer.

Conclusion

While we have faced several challenges, we have defeated them all and become a stronger unit for it. We are approaching our "crunch time," as we tag in to provide communications support to many bases decommissioning strategic assets. Based on the obstacles we've overcome so far, I'm confident that we will continue to adapt and overcome, providing a world-class level of communications support to troops in theater. "Forewarned is Forearmed!"

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ACRONYM QuickScan

BFT - Blue Force Tracker

ECU - Environmental Cooling Unit

ESB - Expeditionary Signal Battalion

ESC - Expeditionary Signal Company

C&E - Communications and Electronics

COS - Contingency Operation Site

COTS - Commercial off the Shelf

CRSP - Central Receiving and Shipping Point

CTE - Combined Training Exercise

HPA - High Power Amplifier

IA -- Information Assurance

IP - Internet Protocol

LNO - Liaison Officer

LOS - Line-Of-Sight

NETOPS - Network Operations

RFID - Radio Frequency Identifier

RPAT -- Redistribution Property Assistance Team

SWITCHEX - Switching Exercise

TACON - Tactically Controlling (unit)

TCF - Technical Control Facilities

TPE - Theater-Provided Equipment

UMO - Unit Movement Officer

USF-I - United States Forces-Iraq